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ABSTRACT

The relationship between career orientation of college institutional research/planning officers and perceptions of organizational and political environments was investigated, based on a survey of 154 officers in public doctoral-granting institutions. Of the 106 respondents, 53 percent were directors of institutional research/planning; 26 percent were vice presidents or vice chancellors, assistant or associate vice presidents, and assistant directors of institutional research/planning; and 21 percent were some other category. A strong indication of role conflict in institutional research and planning officers of the large public universities was found. This group perceived their actual roles as high on political responsiveness and high on political advocacy; they preferred a role directly opposite: a role of policy advocacy with low political responsiveness. Identifying infrequently with a career orientation of institutional research/planning specialist, respondents selected more often an orientation of institutional team member and general administrator in higher education. Most respondents perceived the authority structure of their institutions as one of a weak hierarchy and their work settings to have a low degree of structure with a moderate adherence to rules and regulations. Harmon's (1969) framework was used to categorize ways in which the respondents interacted with their political environment. It is concluded that academic and professional development programs need to stress interaction skills of political astuteness, communication, organizational behavior, and a sense of professional identity. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

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Perceptions of Organizational and Political Environments:
Results of A National Survey of Institutional Research/Planning
Officers at Large Public Universities

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Mary Corcoran
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Abstract

By applying concepts from the field of public administration, this study has detected a strong indication of role conflict in institutional research and planning officers of large public universities. Generally, this group perceived their actual role as both high on political responsiveness and advocacy; they preferred a role directly opposite--of policy advocacy with low political responsiveness. Identifying infrequently with a career orientation of institutional research/planning specialist, respondents selected more often an orientation of institutional team member and general administrator in higher education. Implications can be drawn that academic and professional development programs need to stress interaction skills of political astuteness, communication, organizational behavior and a sense of professional identity.

Perceptions of Organizational and Political Environments:
Results of a National Survey of Institutional
Research/Planning Officers at Large Public Universities

Administrators in the field of institutional research/planning function in several environments. They are expected to achieve a degree of success in both their internal organizational environment and their external political environment. According to Wilensky (cited in Tetlow, 1979), "the amount of resources that an organization commits to the intelligence [institutional research] function is determined by its relationship with its external and internal environments" (p.8). One implication of this statement is that the amount of resources an institutional research/planning office will receive is dependent on the ability of its administrators and staff to operate in both of these environments.

Perceptions by planning officers and directors of institutional research of their internal management and external political systems may be a part of their effectiveness. Perceptions often form the basis for styles of operation and management. Does the administrator view his internal environment as strongly hierarchical with a structured environment in relation to rules and regulations? In terms of his external political environment, how does the institutional research/planning administrator view his role? Should he take a passive role and respond to demands from outside political authorities, or should he take an active role and become a key formulator of institutional policy? Bricker (1979) suggested that those who work in public bureaucracies need to understand power and organizational behavior.

Within institutional research/planning there are administrators with similar training, yet with quite different career orientations. Some may consider themselves as members of their specific institution-- as "institutional members." Others may see themselves as "specialists" in institutional research/planning oriented toward research. A third group may see themselves as "higher education administrators," rather than as specialists.

Answers to these questions should have implications for academic and professional development programs specializing in institutional research/planning. Tetlow (1979) applied Wilensky's (1967) concept that the institutional researcher must strive to become a comprehensive organizational specialist. An institutional researcher/planner must acquire an ability to deal with both internal and external political environments typical of universities.

Survey Method

Previous research in public administration (Foster, 1980; Storrar, 1981) has dealt with relationships between career orientation and perceptions of organizational and political environments. This survey attempts to measure those same concepts in the field of institutional research/planning and determine if similar relationships exists.

A survey instrument, similar to one used by Storrar (1981), was mailed to 154 primary institutional research/planning officers in public doctoral-granting institutions during February, 1981. One follow-up mailing raised the response rate to 69% (106 usable questionnaires).

The institutions considered were identified from the Carnegie Council's A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 1976, fitting the categories of Research Universities I, Research Universities II, Doctorate-granting Universities I, and Doctorate-granting Universities II. The number of institutions which met these criteria totalled 120. The rationale used in selection of this population was that large, complex public organizations are more likely to have full-time institutional research and/or planning officers.

Appropriate personnel were identified from the AIR Membership Directory 1979-80, Society for College and University Planning Directory 1978-79, Yearbook of Higher Education 1979-80, and college catalogs. In cases where both an institutional research and planning officer were listed, a questionnaire was sent to each. The confidentiality of responses precluded a determination of the number of institutions represented by respondents. No attempt was made to divide responses between "planner" and "institutional researcher" because many individuals carried overlapping titles and because of other non-standard title practices common to higher education.

Results

Characteristics of the Study Population

The group was primarily (53%) directors of institutional research/planning; 26% were vice presidents or vice chancellors, assistant or associate vice presidents, and assistant directors of institutional research/planning; and other (21%). Individuals who have been in their current position from 1-5 years accounted for the majority of the survey group (66%). The next largest group (26%) has spent 6-10 years in their current position. Over half (56%) were in the 31-45 age group with few

over sixty (3%). Middle-aged males were in the majority. Of all the respondents, 85% were males. When asked the number of years worked in institutional research/planning, 39% indicated 6-10 years and 26% indicated 11-15 years. The majority (58%) held a doctoral degree with education as the predominant field.

Analysis of Career Identification

The questionnaire first measured the career orientation of respondents. The concept of career orientation has been used in research by Schein (1965), Gouldner (1958), Foster and Jones (1978), and Storrar (1981). The career orientation concept employed here determined how the institutional research/planning officer viewed himself and his job. By describing what he is, the individual reveals much about his career orientation. Respondents were asked to identify with three different career orientations: institutional member, institutional research/planning professional, or higher education professional, based upon descriptions of these different orientations in the questionnaire.

The career orientations were almost equally divided between institutional member and higher education professional (Table 1). The option of institutional research/planning professional was selected by few respondents (13%). This low rate of identification as an institutional research/planning professional is interesting because 53% of the survey population are directors of institutional research/planning. When career identifications were analyzed by position title, there was no apparent difference in the responses.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1

Career Orientation

Institutional member	43%
Institutional research/ planning professional	13
Higher education professional	44

n=105

Organizational Environment

Authority Structures. Next considered was an analysis of responses about (1) their institutions' internal authority system and (2) the appropriate relationship with the external political environments. Because earlier studies (Kornhauser, 1962; Etzioni, 1964; Scott, 1965) have indicated that professional authority and organizational authority tend to be in conflict, perceptions of organizational authority were investigated, using a scale adapted from Hall (1968). The scale consisted of eight statements about organizational conditions where respondents indicated the degree to which each statement described conditions in their institution. Responses to each five-point Likert-type item ranged from "very well" to "very poorly" with "undecided" as the middle response.

Insert Table 2 about here

It is apparent in Table 2 that most (79%) perceive the authority structure of their institutions as one of a weak hierarchy. According to their perception, professionals in institutional research/planning do not consider their institutional organizations to be highly structured or the existing structures of authority to be highly controlled. This finding is consistent with a recent study of administrators in vocational rehabilitation (Storror, 1981). When analyzed by career orientation, there were no variations in respondents' perceptions of authority.

Rules and Regulations. Perceptions of the internal management structure of institutions are influenced by those institutions' rules and regulations. Scott (1965) portrayed professionals in bureaucratic organizations as resisting rules and regulations of such bureaucracies. In

Table 2

Perceptions of Authority

Strong hierarchy	1%
Moderate hierarchy	20
Weak hierarchy	79

n=106

this survey a series of five questions provided a scale for respondents to evaluate their institutions' rules and regulations.

Insert Table 3 about here

This group (Table 3) perceived the organizational environment of their institutions to be moderate. This finding is consistent with the perception of the authority structure as being weakly hierarchical. The emerging pattern suggests that institutional research/planning professionals view their work settings to have a low degree of structure with a moderate adherence to rules and regulations. This finding differs from those of Etzioni (1964) and Scott (1965), but is consistent with Perrow (1979). In organizations where a large number of professionals have internalized rules, there is often a weak hierarchical structure with an absence of rules.

Political Environment

Interaction Styles. From the literature two basic themes emerge dealing with the interaction of professionals in the political arena. First is the democratic theory literature which states that administrators in public agencies should be responsive to the demands of the public (Redford, 1969; Hyneman, 1950). A second theme states that professionals tend to have a preference for making decisions based on criteria such as specialized training and subject matter expertise (Rouke, 1969; Lauth, 1978; Mosher, 1975). Professionals often resent intrusion of political decision-makers into their policy arena. Two central dimensions of Harmon's (1969) framework are policy responsiveness and policy advocacy. By considering the dimensions of policy responsiveness and policy advocacy

Table 3

Perceptions of Rules and Regulations

Strict rules and regulations	19%
Moderate rules and regulations	56
Weak rules and regulations	25

n=106

simultaneously, and dividing each into two categories (high and low), it is possible to describe four different administrative styles which categorize ways in which administrators interact with their political environment (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Based on Harmon's (1969) framework, the first interaction style is that of a proactive administrator role--high on political responsiveness and high on policy advocacy. The proactive administrator is an advocate of new policy, and one who facilitates efforts of interest groups to influence educational or institutional policy. The second style of interaction is an expert administrator--one who is low on political responsiveness and high on policy advocacy. The expert is knowledgeable about problems confronting his institution's programs and policies and prefers professional formulation of his institution's programs and policies over political determination. The third style is that of an instrumental administrator, high on political responsiveness and low on policy advocacy. The instrumental administrator is responsive to public demands and avoids direct involvement in determination of institutional policies and programs. The fourth style is that of a survival administrator role, low on both responsiveness and advocacy. The survival administrator seeks to limit the institutional access of political authorities in order to ensure survival of his institution and protect existing programs.

Actual and Preferred Interaction Styles. Respondents were asked to rank four descriptive styles suggesting how they as institutional research/

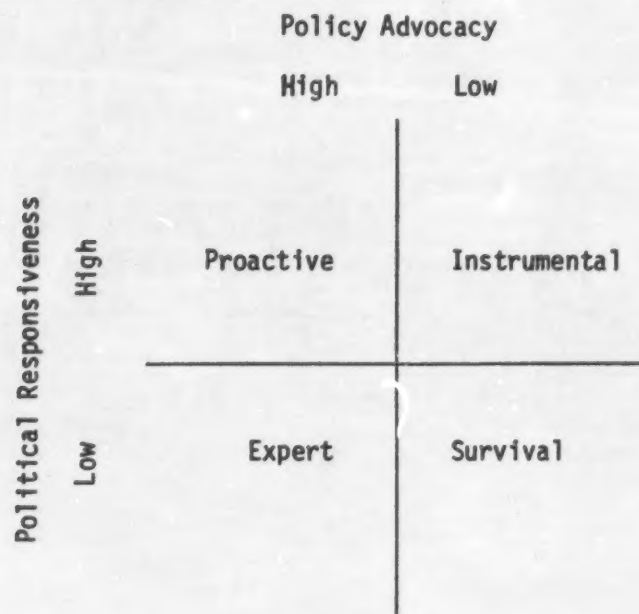


Figure 1

Harmon's Framework

Interaction Style of Administrators

planning officers actually function. Figure 2 shows that the proactive administrator was most frequently selected (40%), followed by the instrumental administrator (27%), and the survival administrator (21%). Expert administrator was infrequently selected (12%).

- - - - -
Insert Figure 2 about here
- - - - -

The group was then asked to rank the four interaction styles in terms of how they thought institutional research/planning administrators ought to relate to political authorities and other relevant groups (Figure 2). Comparing responses in the figure provides some interesting insights. The respondents ranked the expert style as most preferred (39%) and proactive second (37%). However, the interaction style of expert administrator is perceived by respondents as least representative of reality. In general, respondents appear to perceive their actual interaction with political authorities and relevant groups as being exactly opposite of their preferred pattern. The style of expert administrator is low on responsiveness and high on advocacy. Many institutional research/planning officers in this study population are making interesting statements about their political environment. Those who perceive themselves as most knowledgeable about the problems confronting their institutions indicate a preference to be the key formulators of institutional programs and policies. Yet this pattern of interaction is least descriptive of their actual setting. This preference for the expert style is consistent with other administrators in public agencies (Storror, 1981; Lauth, 1978).

Perceptions of Actual and Preferred Interaction Styles

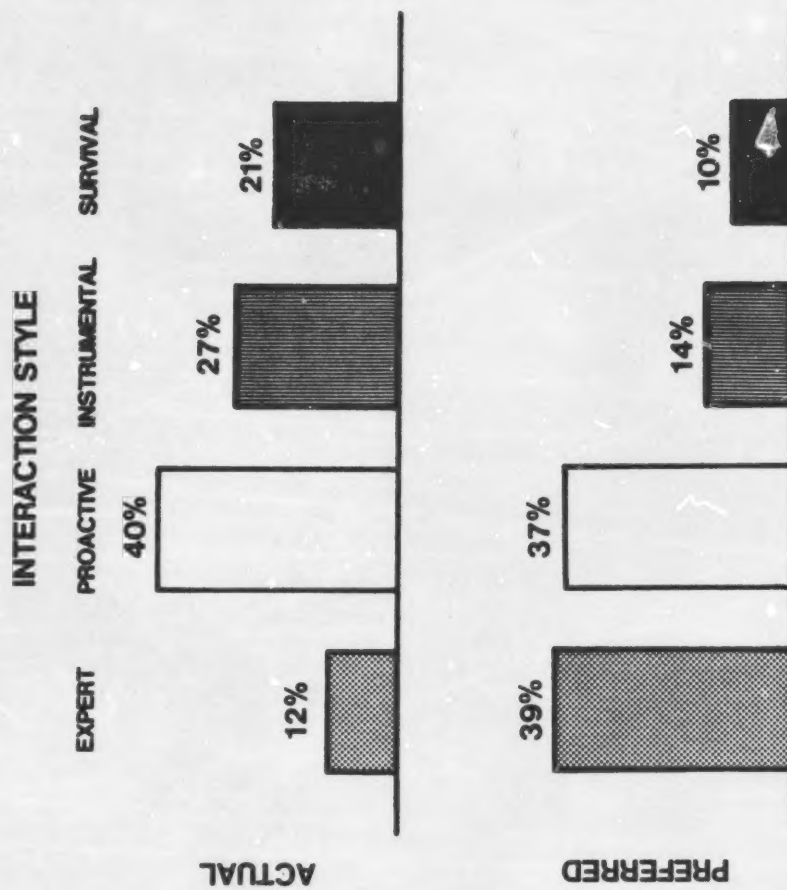


Figure 2

Styles by Career Orientation. When the perceptions of political style are analyzed by the career orientation of the respondents, there is some variation. Respondents who identified themselves with a career orientation of "institutional member" differ from the other two types in perceptions of preferred interaction styles (Table 4). Institutional member respondents more frequently selected proactive over expert style, viewing their role as one of political responsiveness and political advocacy rather than one of policy formulation. The institutional research/planning professionals and higher education professionals see themselves as experts and indicate they should have a role in formulating policy.

Insert Table 4 about here

Implications

By applying concepts from the field of public administration, this study has detected a strong indication of role conflict in institutional research and planning officers of large public universities. This group perceived their actual roles as high on political responsiveness and high on political advocacy; they preferred a role directly opposite-- a role of policy advocacy with low political responsiveness. Identifying infrequently with a career orientation of institutional research/planning specialist, these respondents selected more often an orientation of institutional team member and general administrator in higher education.

A number of implications can be drawn from the survey results. First, this research effort supports the belief that large, complex

Table 4

Perceptions by Career Orientation of Actual and
Preferred Political Interaction Styles

Interaction Style	Actual			Preferred		
	Institutional	Institutional Research/	Higher Education	Institutional	Institutional Research/	Higher Education
	Member	Planning Professional	Professional	Member	Planning Professional	Professional
	(n=38)	(n=13)	(n=42)	(n=42)	(n=13)	(n=42)
Expert	9%	8%	17%	35%	46%	44%
Proactive	44	46	34	50	38	22
Instrumental	22	23	30	10	8	22
Survival	25	23	19	5	8	12

public universities do indeed operate on a political model with a correspondingly weak hierarchical structure (Glenny, 1979; Walker, 1979; Moore, 1976). In a political environment, decision making and policy formulation tend to involve many internal and external groups with divergent interests. The political process may contribute to an apparent role conflict for many institutional research/planning officers. This conflict is understandable, especially where planning models, analytical work or computer applications are developed under the direction of this officer to support management, but are disregarded often in the political process.

Glenny (1979) provided insight into policy formulation in higher education. He listed institutional research officers as being in his category of "anonymous leaders." Accepting Glenny's position suggests that institutional research/planning people are not completely aware of their existing influence in policy formulation.

Findings from this study may offer further clarification of a survey of the membership of AIR. Morstain and Smart (1974) found that institutional research personnel at public universities and colleges expressed less job satisfaction than did their counterparts at community colleges and private institutions. Public university and college level personnel also expressed a desire to increase their activities in "planning and coordination" and "organizational studies." The apparent role conflict in large public universities revealed by this research may account for some of the findings of Morstain and Smart.

A further implication addresses perceptions of political interaction styles, both actual and preferred. Respondents see themselves as high on both political responsiveness and advocacy, indicating that they perceive their role as active in the political arena. Their actual preference is for the expert style of interaction, which implies an active role in terms of advocacy, and a passive role in terms of responsiveness. Institutional research/planning professionals feel that they possess the knowledge and expertise needed to formulate policies and programs--feelings consistent with those of professionals in other public administration fields. The possibility of this group striving toward a different kind of active role could have an impact on the future of institutional research/planning within the field of higher education.

If institutional research/planning personnel attempt to assume an active policy advocacy role in their institutional settings, they may abdicate their relatively "neutral corner." An advocacy role requires qualitative judgments, a knowledge of organizational behavior, and the use of a variety of interpersonal skills. Implications can be drawn that academic and professional development programs need to stress such interaction skills as political astuteness, communication, organizational behavior, and a sense of professional identity.

A small proportion (13%) of this group view themselves as institutional research/planning professionals. The lack of career identification seems to have broad implications--concerning the individual, institution, specialized field and recognized profession. If the institutional research/planning professional does not see himself as a professional in his own career field, where will he direct his energies for advancement?

If he continues to see himself as a general administrator, this may affect the development and strength of his function within the institution. Moreover, the profession is likely to encounter difficulties in maintaining its recognition as a viable force within higher education.

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